

# History in the making at Parker's Landing

## Signs to help preserve importance of site

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WASHOUGAL — Volunteers working with the Port of Camas-Washougal plan to have porcelain-and-steel interpretive signs installed in an information booth at Parker's Landing Park by spring.

The historic site, near port offices at 24 A St. in Washougal, is on land considered the site of the first American pioneer settlement in what is now Western Washington.

The eight panels proposed there will depict scenes including Native

Americans, fur traders and early pioneers. They will also provide information and images of Parkersville, once a thriving community at the site.

The signs are intended to teach visitors the historical importance of the area.

In the early 1800s, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark spent several days camping at the site along the Columbia River during their exploration of the Pacific Northwest. They found it to be a peaceful place to rest at the western entrance to the Columbia River Gorge, which was terrifying with its swift currents and imposing landscape.

About 40 years later, a Missouri family led by David C. Parker set

up an American homestead at the site, the first in what is now Western Washington.

Parker platted an entire town called Parkersville. It failed to materialize before his death in 1858, but Lewis Van Vleet took over the land, followed Parker's plans and built what became a bustling pioneer town in the 1870s.

Competing landowners constructed a port just downstream that could handle bigger boats on the Columbia River. Eventually, most of the hotels, stores and people moved to the bordering city called Washougal. Parkersville was abandoned.

Van Vleet family members sold

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## Parker

Donations, city contributions made signs possible

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the town's land to the port in 1968, and in the mid-1970s, port officials decided to develop the site.

But a group of local volunteers fought to save it for history. Through their efforts, the 3.88-acre Parkersville Historic Site was placed on the National Registers of Historic Places in 1977.

Volunteers also pushed for restoration of the dilapidated Van Vleet house on the property, but a fire destroyed the house a year later.

Hard feelings developed between some of the port commissioners and some of the volunteers.

"We had different ideas about how the land should be used," former volunteer Dorothy Piontek said. "They thought we were a bunch of old housewives making it hard for them to bring in big business."

Neither side would budge. Until the mid-1980s, the site was used for boat parking.

A truce was called in March



TROY WAYRYNEN/The Columbian

**Rough draft of history:** A sketch of one of the eight permanent Parker's Landing Park interpretive panels is taped inside a kiosk at the Port of Camas-Washougal. The park's advisory committee is asking for feedback from the public on the content of these panels. "We'd like this park to become one of the main stops for people as they go east to the Gorge," said organizer Sally Alves.

1986. Port officials built a parking lot over much of the site, but left a 1.3-acre spot just west of the port's main office for the historic park.

Volunteers developed a master plan and added, among other things, a rock monument, rose ar-

bor and a flower garden to the riverfront area peppered with 100-year-old walnut and apple trees. The port since has been helpful and cooperative, yet the site has struggled for recognition, volunteers say.

"It seems to be a big secret. A

lot of people, even locally, don't know it's here or don't know its significance," said Sally Alves, chairwoman of the eight-person committee in charge of the project. "We want to make these panels so people will know the history, and we want to put a marker on the highway to bring in tourists. ... We'd like this park to become one of the main stops for people as they go east to the Gorge. We'd like to bring back some of its glory."

The public is invited to review preliminary sketches of the signs on view at port offices and give written input on their content until Oct. 23.

On Nov. 2, the local committee will review the comments and send the designs to a Seattle company, which will make the 2-foot-tall, 4-foot-wide panels. Total cost of the project is \$16,000. The cities of Camas and Washougal each provided \$2,000, and the remaining money was raised through donations.

Alves said the sign project has been a struggle from the beginning.

"We had no idea how much effort this would take," she said. "We've been working on it so hard for the past two years. ... It's practically taken over my life."